
*AHR Forum*Transcending Identity: Gandhi, Nonviolence, and the Pursuit of a “Different” Freedom in Modern India

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IN THE PAST TWO DECADES, subaltern historians and postcolonial scholars have brought to our attention the need to question the generally assumed universality of Western categories in framing the histories of the rest of the world.¹ The exclusive deployment of Western concepts to explain historical development in India and other non-Western countries, they say, not only has marginalized indigenous systems of knowledge and practices, but has also resulted in the histories of these countries being presented in negative terms as a deviation from the universal trajectories of capital, democracy, and liberalism, which are themselves grounded in particular historical experiences of the West. Thus, as Dipesh Chakrabarty, among others, has argued, most scholars trained in this intellectual tradition have characterized India as “not modern” or “not bourgeois” or “not liberal.” The new intellectual sensitivity toward non-Western systems of thought has resulted in a significant number of works that deploy the critical category of difference.

Yet none of the four major schools of historiography on modern India—Marxist, Cambridge, nationalist, and subaltern—has extended this notion of difference to the discourse of freedom associated with the Gandhian nonviolent resistance movement against British colonialism. This is a surprising omission, given the striking ways in which the Gandhian discourse of freedom departed from the Western discourse of freedom. While the distinctiveness of the Gandhian movement in relation to other forms of anticolonial resistance of the day was evident to Gandhi’s contemporaries and has been noted by scholars, the use of difference as an analytical category to

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¹ See Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (Princeton, N.J., 1993); Ranajit Guha, *Dominance without Hegemony: History and Power in Colonial India* (Cambridge, Mass., 1997); Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, N.J., 2000).

distinguish the specificity of his political discourse has not been central to Gandhian studies.²

One possible explanation for this lack of attention is that historians of modern India do not see the notion of difference as extending to the exteriority and autonomy of the intellectual and cultural traditions that are reflected in Gandhi.³ Whereas the Western discourse of political freedom, based on the concepts of individual rights, private property, representative government, national identity, and the nation-state, has generally been assumed to be a universal framework without which neither freedom movements nor democracies in other parts of the world could succeed, the Gandhian movement of nonviolent resistance against British colonialism had its own discourse of freedom, grounded in a different tradition of thought and practice.⁴ It was anchored not in the Western notion of freedom, but rather in the Indic—Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain—discourses of renunciative freedom (*moksha* and *nirvana* in Sanskrit) and their respective ascetic practices.⁵

Thus the significance of an inquiry into the nature and origins of the Gandhian concept of freedom extends much farther than the historical moment it seeks to understand. Because so much of the critical discourse in the social sciences and the

² For the most important works that have emphasized the distinctiveness of Gandhian thought in relation to other Indian nationalists, see Partha Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse?* (New York, 1986); Ashis Nandy, *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self under Colonialism* (Delhi, 1983). See also Tridib Suhrud, "Emptied of All but Love: Gandhiji's First Public Fast," in Debjani Ganguly and John Docker, eds., *Rethinking Gandhi and Nonviolent Relationality: Global Perspectives* (London, 2007), 66–79. Two recent essays that have stressed the difference between Gandhi's political thought and Western liberalism are Ajay Skaria, "Gandhi's Politics: Liberalism and the Question of the Ashram," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 101, no. 4 (2002): 955–986; and Faisal Fatehali Devji, "A Practice of Prejudice: Gandhi's Politics of Friendship," in Shail Mayaram, M. S. S. Pandian, and Ajay Skaria, eds., *Muslims, Dalits, and the Fabrications of History* (New Delhi, 2005), 78–98. While their essays are insightful, both of these historians reduce the categories deployed in the Gandhian movement to the person of Gandhi and see no antecedents for these categories in Indian intellectual history. Indeed, they derive the categories they deploy to analyze Gandhi's thought and practice from Western intellectual traditions, particularly recent developments in European philosophy associated with the writings of Jacques Derrida and Emmanuel Levinas. In the final analysis, Gandhi's difference in these writings is assimilated into debates within Western intellectual thought. In this regard, see also Akeel Bilgrami, "Gandhi's Integrity: The Philosophy behind the Politics," *Postcolonial Studies* 5, no. 1 (2002): 79–93.

³ While some works by political scientists such as Bhikhu Parekh have looked at the indigenous roots of Gandhian discourse, none have focused exclusively on the Gandhian discourse of freedom in its difference from the Western discourse of freedom or the implications of this difference for the nature of anticolonial resistance. See Parekh, *Colonialism, Tradition, and Reform: An Analysis of Gandhi's Political Discourse* (New Delhi, 1989). Others who have emphasized the indigenous sources of Gandhi's thought are Thomas Pantham, "Thinking with Mahatma Gandhi: Beyond Liberal Democracy," *Political Theory* 11, no. 2 (1983): 165–188; A. L. Basham, "Traditional Influences on the Thought of Mahatma Gandhi," in Ravindra Kumar, ed., *Essays on Gandhian Politics: The Rowlatt Satyagraha of 1919* (Oxford, 1971), 17–42; and Suhrud, "Emptied of All but Love."

⁴ Although he comes to the topic from a different angle, the political scientist Dennis Dalton is to my knowledge the only scholar to have noted and focused on the distinctive nature of the Indian idea of freedom as it related to some of the most important figures in Indian history. Dennis Gilmore Dalton, *Indian Idea of Freedom: Political Thought of Swami Vivekananda, Aurobindo Ghose, Mahatma Gandhi and Rabindranath Tagore* (Gurgaon, India, 1982).

⁵ I use the terms "Western" and "Indic" here only in reference to the places of historical origin of the two discourses of freedom. As traditions of thought, with claims to universal validity, they are not bound by such geographical and political boundaries. What I call "Western" is of course very much a part of Indian politics today, and what I call "Indic" or "Gandhian" has found an audience outside India. In reference to the nature of freedom as thought, therefore, I will use the terms "identitarian" and "renunciative," respectively.

humanities today is at least implicitly anchored in the dominant Western notion of freedom, it has been difficult to gain a critical distance from it. An exploration into the history of the Gandhian movement can open up a position of exteriority on this Western discourse, showing that it is not self-evident. By bringing the two traditions under each other's critical gaze, we can, at least potentially, think in new ways about freedom in the modern world, ways that can take us far beyond the limits and specificities of South Asian history or scholarship.⁶

The question of difference as it relates to the nature and implications of the historical encounter between Indic and Western cultural and intellectual traditions under the British Empire can be broadly approached in two ways: difference as identity and difference as thought. In the discourse of difference as identity, the notion of difference functions as the basis of cultural and national identity. In the discourse of difference as thought, on the other hand, difference functions as a marker of the nature and specificity of thought, its origin and historical significance. The crucial difference between the two approaches is that difference as thought goes beyond identity in its claim to universality and truth.

If there has been no serious attempt in modern Indian historiography to situate the Gandhian movement in terms of difference, it is largely because scholars have understood difference primarily as the ground for a discourse of national and civilizational identity, not as a source of categories. There is an underlying assumption that non-Western intellectual traditions do not offer categories of thought with claims to truth—that they become historically significant only as emblems of identity. Not surprisingly, therefore, one of the most frequently cited political arguments advanced by Marxist and left scholars in India against deploying the notion of difference has been that any critique of Enlightenment rationalism of the West based on Indic traditions risks promoting nativistic indigenism, which in turn feeds into the rising tide of Hindu nationalism. The presumption—unstated though it may be—is that the only possible role for Indic traditions in history today is as symbols of identity, not as sources of thought. Such apprehension is ironic, in that the Gandhian movement was in fact one of the first mass political movements for national independence to be based on the rejection of identity and nationalism.

There is, however, a far more important methodological reason for the absence of works that problematize Gandhian discourse in terms of difference. In the form of Marxism that is dominant in Indian historiography, discourse is nothing more than a reflection of class interest and class conflict, the true and *a priori* driving forces of history. Marxist historians, therefore, have completely ignored the historical specificity of Gandhian discourse and its difference from Western discourse, seeing Gandhi's ethical practices as nothing more than a cover for what were in essence shrewd bourgeois political tactics, and therefore an aspect of his politics that need not be taken seriously. While the Cambridge and nationalist schools have important dif-

⁶ I am not suggesting that other conceptions of freedom did not exist over time in Western or Indian society, or that this is the only or even the most important approach to the two discourses of freedom. It is impossible in an article such as this one to address the two traditions of freedom in all their historical and intellectual heterogeneity, complexity, and contingency. My aim, then, is not to do an exhaustive study, but rather to explore the historical moment at which the two discourses of freedom came to intersect in their starkly different roles in colonial India, and in the process illuminated each other in their specificity.

ferences, they share the Marxists' dismissal of discourse as constitutive of history. Not surprisingly, for example, Cambridge historians have dissociated the specific tactic of nonviolence from the discourse on which it was grounded to suggest that the latter was nothing more than a clever political tool used to achieve various external ends in the form of social, national, and class interests.⁷ The assumption behind much of this historiography is that Gandhian discourse was not anchored in an end of its own.

The case of the subaltern school is somewhat more complex. Insofar as most subaltern historians have based their own reading of Gandhi on Marxist categories, they too have neglected to focus on the specificity of Gandhian discourse.⁸ In their more general historical explorations into modern India, however, particularly in the last two decades, they have focused on discourse and also deployed the notion of difference. Partha Chatterjee, one of the most influential subaltern historians of modern India, uses the concept of difference in his seminal work on Indian nationalism only as it relates to the origin of the discourse of national identity.⁹ For him, difference as a marker of the divide between India and the West becomes important for nationalist discourse at the "moment of departure" or origin, as it sought to make the civilizational difference of India the foundation of national identity. Significantly, however, Chatterjee does not problematize the Gandhian movement in terms of the same notion of difference, and he points to Gandhi's distinctiveness only in relation to other Indian nationalists. Beyond noting in passing some characteristic features of the movement as reflective of "peasant consciousness," he makes no serious attempt to problematize Gandhian discourse in its precise nature and origins.¹⁰ In his view, the real historical significance of the Gandhian movement lay in its use by the Indian bourgeoisie as a tactic to mobilize the peasantry against the British Empire even as it denied them any share in the postcolonial state.¹¹ Chatterjee reduces discourses in his analysis to two kinds of identity—class and nation—and so feels no need to problematize discourse as thought. For him, the distinctiveness of Gandhian discourse can ultimately be said to be a distinction without significance, having no historical meaning other than as a tool in the rise of the Indian bourgeoisie.

⁷ While nationalist historians have interpreted the ethical practice of nonviolence as an ingenious tool devised by Gandhi and the Indian National Congress for mobilizing a disarmed and passive population and forging it into a powerful anticolonial resistance movement, historians of the Cambridge school have interpreted nonviolence as a strategy developed by a collaborationist elite for effecting a peaceful transition of power from the colonial state to the Indian state. For nationalist historiography, see B. Pattabhi Sitaramayya, *History of the Indian National Congress*, 2 vols. (Delhi, 1969); and Jawaharlal Nehru, *The Discovery of India* (Delhi, 1989). The Marxist historian Bipan Chandra shares the nationalist view on Gandhi. See his *Indian National Movement: The Long-Term Dynamics* (Delhi, 1988), 1–5. Other representative Marxist works include R. Palme Dutt, *India Today* (Bombay, 1949), and A. R. Desai, *Social Background of Indian Nationalism* (Bombay, 1954). For the Cambridge interpretation of the Gandhian movement, see John Gallagher, Gordon Johnson, and Anil Seal, eds., *Locality, Province and Nation: Essays in Indian Politics, 1870–1940* (Cambridge, 1973); and Judith M. Brown, *Gandhi's Rise to Power: Indian Politics, 1915–1922* (Cambridge, 1972).

⁸ Shahid Amin, "Gandhi as Mahatma: Gorakhpur District, Eastern UP, 1921–2," in Ranajit Guha, ed., *Subaltern Studies III* (Delhi, 1984), 1–55; Guha, *Dominance without Hegemony*; Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World*.

⁹ See Partha Chatterjee's discussion of the thought of Bankim Chandra Chatterji in *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World*, 54–81.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 85–125.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 125.

The question of difference has been central in the works of another leading subaltern scholar, Dipesh Chakrabarty.¹² In *Provincializing Europe*, Chakrabarty uses difference in the sense of excess, contending that modernity in India is too complex and specific to fit into the framework of thought inherited from the West.¹³ By “provincializing Europe,” he aims to expose the limits of the Western intellectual traditions’ claims to totality from the margins of colonial and postcolonial history. His own framework, however, does not adequately problematize the nature and implications of the encounter between Indian and Western thought in terms of difference. After all, his notion of difference as excess is also applicable to the West, as no Western system of thought could conceptualize life even in the West in all its complexity and totality. Also, even as Chakrabarty assumes that the West continues to be the sole source of thought with claims to universality and truth, and as such is not entirely bound by geography or history, he finds India to be lacking any claim to thought, a claim that would require the ability to rise above the particularities and idiosyncrasies of place. Ultimately, Chakrabarty does not see the possibility of an exteriority to the Western intellectual tradition in the sense of a competing system of thought that originates outside the West. It is not surprising, therefore, that what began as a claim to provincialize Europe ends up as not much more than an exploration into how Western thought “may be renewed from and for the margins,” that is, the non-West.¹⁴

Notwithstanding Chakrabarty’s and Chatterjee’s works, a position of exteriority to Western intellectual and political traditions that departs from the postcolonial and subaltern understanding not only is theoretically possible but has in fact played a significant, even central, role in India’s movement for independence.¹⁵ Gandhi himself was aware that Indian intellectual traditions were widely assumed to be a spent force as a source of thought and could serve as nothing more than markers of identity. “Of all superstitions that affect India,” he wrote in 1921, “none is so great as that a knowledge of the English language is necessary for imbibing ideas of liberty, and developing accuracy of thought.”¹⁶ What he called the greatest of all “superstitions” has also emerged as the most important and enduring intellectual legacy of colonialism in India: the belief that because the West is the sole source of categories in the modern world, English is the sole language of thought as such in India. It is against this “superstition” that we need to situate not only the genealogy of Gandhi’s own reflections on the category of liberty, but also the nonviolent anti-colonial movement that he led. If the question of the autonomy of Indian languages and their ability to develop categories of thought arose for Gandhi in the context of a discussion of the concept of liberty, it was precisely because this concept as articulated in all its difference and specificity in Indian languages had been the guiding principle of his own intellectual and political exertions.

¹² Although the Gandhian movement itself has not been Chakrabarty’s focus, a brief discussion of his approach to difference can help to contextualize the larger claims of this article.

¹³ Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 6.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 16.

¹⁵ My focus is not on difference as such, but only on the moment when this difference rose to historical significance.

¹⁶ M. K. Gandhi, “Evil Wrought by the English Medium,” *Young India*, April 27, 1921, in Gandhi, *Young India, 1919–22* (Madras, 1922), 458.

The historiographical approaches have all attempted to trace the origins of the discourse and practice of nonviolent resistance to Gandhi as a person. Even historians who focus on Gandhian ideas have tended to see them as deriving either from his personal reading of Western writers such as Tolstoy, Ruskin, and Thoreau or from his upbringing.¹⁷ They are working from the assumption that the pre-given subject stands above history while determining its movement, thus forgetting that the subject itself is a historical construction and is shaped by larger historical forces. There is a different way to look at the historical figure of Gandhi, however, through the use of the methodological category of the enunciative persona (not person). From this standpoint we can see him as the *samnyasin*, or renouncer, in the role of a political activist and the leader of a resistance movement. It is because Gandhi donned the enunciative persona of a *samnyasin* that the Indic tradition of renunciative freedom became the basis for a new kind of politics—a politics of nonviolence.

The category of enunciative persona makes it possible to approach discourses in terms of larger historical, institutional, and cultural genealogies rather than simply attribute them to substantive subjects, whether individuals, social groups, or identities. It also enables us to bring discourse and practices together in a complex interrelationship and moves us away from studying politics as simply a history of ideas or thoughts.¹⁸ From this methodological perspective, Gandhi the person is only the bearer of a principal enunciative persona, the real subject of the discourse: the renouncer. The notion of the enunciative persona, in short, refers to the historically constructed subject in opposition to the often unproblematic assumption of an ahistorical notion of the person as the subject of history.¹⁹

GANDHI WAS TRAINED AS A LAWYER, and his early political activism against the racial policies of the British colonial government in South Africa (1894–1914) was lodged within what we might call a juridical discursive paradigm, where the primary object was to appeal to imperial justice against the unjust acts of the local government by organizing petitions to Parliament for the redress of grievances.²⁰ This juridical dis-

¹⁷ Martin Green, *The Origins of Nonviolence: Tolstoy and Gandhi in Their Historical Settings* (University Park, Pa., 1986); Janko Lavrin, "Tolstoy and Gandhi," *Russian Review* 19 (1960): 132–139. See also Eric H. Erikson, *Gandhi's Truth: On the Origins of Militant Non-Violence* (New York, 1969). Ashis Nandy also emphasizes the person of Gandhi and reads Gandhian ideas as symptomatic of an underlying psychology of the colonized; see *The Intimate Enemy*, 48–63. See also Susan Hoeber Rudolph, "The New Courage: An Essay on Gandhi's Psychology," *World Politics* 16 (1963): 98–117.

¹⁸ Even those works that have explored Gandhian discourse in its specificity have not departed from the idea of Gandhi as subject. See Parekh, *Colonialism, Tradition, and Reform*, 11–33, 71–138.

¹⁹ For Michel Foucault's thoughts on related issues, see Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge and The Discourse on Language*, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (New York, 1972), 88–105. A similar category of conceptual persona is used by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari in *What Is Philosophy?* (New York, 1994), 61–83. For Deleuze, the conceptual persona is a figure of thought, not one historically produced.

²⁰ Gandhi was educated at the Inner Temple in London and practiced as a barrister in South Africa in the High Courts of Natal and Transvaal from 1894 to 1914. For biographies of Gandhi, see B. R. Nanda, *Mahatma Gandhi: A Biography* (Boston, 1958); Louis Fischer, *The Life of Mahatma Gandhi* (New York, 1950); David Arnold, *Gandhi: Profiles in Power* (Harlow, 2001). For Gandhi's life in South Africa, see Robert A. Huttenback, *Gandhi in South Africa: British Imperialism and the Indian Question, 1860–1914* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1971); Judith M. Brown and Martin Prozesky, eds., *Gandhi and South Africa: Principles and Politics* (New York, 1996); Maureen Swan, *Gandhi: The South African Experience* (Johannesburg, 1985); Brian M. du Toit, "The Mahatma Gandhi and South Africa," *Journal of Modern African*

course, like the insistence on nonviolence that logically followed from the faith in imperial justice, was not unique to Gandhi; it was also the basis for the anticolonial agitation in India during the same period. It is intriguing, however, that even as Gandhi's actions in South Africa were framed by juridical discourse, there was a simultaneous irruption in his life of a set of ethical, spiritual, and ascetic practices that were not accompanied by a discourse that could make them intelligible in relation to the political challenges of the day.²¹ Tolstoy Farm, where Gandhi settled with his family and some close friends and followers and began what would become a lifelong experiment with practices such as fasting, celibacy, meditation, and manual labor, reflected his deliberate decision to withdraw from and even renounce modern city life.²² As a response to what was obviously a political challenge faced by a colonized people, his retreat to a rural ascetic and ethical lifestyle seems a curious move indeed.

This response, however, was not entirely unique or unprecedented. With the advent of colonialism in late-eighteenth- and nineteenth-century India, issues of subordination, inequality, and freedom for the colonized had become critical for Indian thinkers even before Gandhi. Strikingly, these thinkers often, if not invariably, responded in precisely the same conflicted, dualistic way. Why? Why did the search for freedom invariably take an ethical, ascetic, and spiritual turn, while the relationship between the people and the government continued to be articulated in terms of justice rather than political freedom? The answer lies in the fact that even as much of anticolonial discourse was grounded in the idea of imperial justice, it also came to be anchored—as if by reflex—in the Indic traditions of ascetic renunciative freedom. While the categories and goals of freedom and liberty had come to be a part of political discourse and practice in the West, in precolonial India they had been a part of spiritual and religious discourse and practice.²³

By the nineteenth century, what has been recognized as a distinctly Western discourse of political freedom as self-government had generally come to be based on two interrelated forms of identity: individual identity, as reflected in the notions of individual rights and private property, and collective identity, as reflected in the notions of popular national sovereignty, the nation-state, and the ideology of nationalism.²⁴ In India, by contrast, the category of freedom was common to all the

Studies 34 (1996): 643–660. For a history of the development of the juridical paradigm, see Mithi Mukherjee, “Justice, War, and the Imperium: India and Britain in Edmund Burke’s Prosecutorial Speeches in the Impeachment Trial of Warren Hastings,” *Law and History Review* 23, no. 3 (Fall 2005): 589–630.

²¹ Gandhi led the Indian community in Natal in petitioning the Natal Legislature and imperial authorities against discriminatory laws such as the Disenfranchising Bill of 1893 and the bill to tax indentured labor in 1894. See *Gandhi’s Autobiography: The Story of My Experiments with Truth*, trans. from the original in Gujarati by Mahadev Desai (Washington, D.C., 1960), 89–307.

²² See *Gandhi’s Autobiography*, 179–187, 235–238, 281–307. See also Mark Thompson, *Gandhi and His Ashrams* (Bombay, 1993). An excellent recent article on the centrality of ashrams in the Gandhian movement is Skaria, “Gandhi’s Politics.” See also Thomas Weber, “Gandhi Moves: Intentional Communities and Friendship,” in Ganguly and Docker, *Rethinking Gandhi and Nonviolent Relationality*, 83–99.

²³ Thomas Pantham has argued that Gandhi’s ethical practices in ashrams such as Tolstoy Farm and Phoenix Settlement can be attributed to his friendship with Henry Polak and Hermann Kallenbach, who were both interested in new age ideas and influenced him in many ways. My contention is that the irruption of these practices in Gandhi had deeper sources. See Weber, “Gandhi Moves,” 86–91.

²⁴ While noting that the Western discourse of freedom as a historical phenomenon is multidimen-

major Indic religions, including Jainism, Buddhism, and Hinduism. Contrary to the popular perception that Hinduism is a religion of personal gods, it in fact has a strong parallel tradition in which there is no conception of God at all. In this tradition of Hinduism, *moksha*, or liberty, is the ultimate of all human goals, and to attain *moksha* is to lose one's identity, individuality, and specificity.²⁵ In other words, in their relationship to identity, the Indic and Western discourses of freedom were diametrically opposed. Whereas the Western understanding of freedom was based on national and individual identity, the Indic understanding meant losing any and all forms of identity. Given that the world operates within a web of identities, the logical conclusion of the Indic understanding of freedom as *moksha* was a complete renunciation of the world. Thus the Western and Indic discourses of freedom can be characterized as identitarian and renunciative, respectively.

In premodern Indian society, life was conceptually organized around the pursuit of four goals, known in Sanskrit as *Purusharthas*, or ultimate human goals: *dharma*, the pursuit of the good, constituting the domain of ethics and law; *artha*, the pursuit of power, constituting the domain of politics; *kama*, the pursuit of pleasure, constituting the domain of sexuality; and *moksha*, the pursuit of freedom, constituting

sional and of immense complexity and heterogeneity, I would like to reiterate that my emphasis here is on only one aspect of it, the relationship between the discourse of freedom and identity. The history of the discourse and practice of freedom could be broadly viewed along five trajectories in their complex interrelationship: the history of resistance against the monarchy, church (both from within and without), and foreign rule; the history of capitalism; the birth of a new ethos as reflected in the Renaissance; the history of nationalism; and the intellectual history of the idea of freedom. My own emphasis in this article is on nationalism as a discourse based in national identity and the idea of freedom. For some general theoretical works on the ideas of freedom in the West, see Isaiah Berlin, "Two Concepts of Liberty," in Berlin, *Four Essays on Liberty* (Oxford, 1969), 118–172. See also Hanna Fenichel Pitkin, "Are Freedom and Liberty Twins?" *Political Theory* 16, no. 4 (November 1988): 523–552; Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (Westport, Conn., 1983), 142. For a comprehensive work on the historical development of ideas of freedom in the West, see Mortimer J. Adler, *The Idea of Freedom: A Dialectical Examination of the Conceptions of Freedom*, 2 vols. (New York, 1961), 2: 15. There has been considerable work on the national specificities of ideas of freedom within Europe. See, for example, Leonard Krieger, *The German Idea of Freedom: History of a Political Tradition* (Chicago, 1962); Dale Van Kley, ed., *The French Idea of Freedom: The Old Regime and the Declaration of Rights of 1789* (Stanford, Calif., 1994); Keith M. Baker, *Inventing the French Revolution: Essays on French Political Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge, 1990); David Thomas König, ed., *Devising Liberty: Preserving and Creating Freedom in the New American Republic* (Stanford, Calif., 1995). For development of the ideas and practices of freedom in relation to Christianity and the Church, see Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (New York, 1958); J. H. Hexter, ed., *Parliament and Liberty: From the Reign of Elizabeth to the English Civil War* (Stanford, Calif., 1992); J. H. Burns and Mark Goldie, eds., *The Cambridge History of Political Thought, 1450–1700* (Cambridge, 1991); Ole Peter Grell and Bob Scribner, eds., *Tolerance and Intolerance in the European Reformation* (Cambridge, 1996); Richard Helmstadter, ed., *Freedom and Religion in the Nineteenth Century* (Stanford, Calif., 1997). For histories of notions of freedom developed in the course of revolutions in different parts of the West, see Isser Woloch, ed., *Revolution and the Meanings of Freedom in the Nineteenth Century* (Stanford, Calif., 1996); Colin Lucas, ed., *The French Revolution and the Creation of Modern Political Culture* (Oxford, 1988); Bernard Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass., 1992); R. R. Palmer, *The Age of the Democratic Revolution* (Princeton, N.J., 1959). Representative works on nationalism include Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London, 2006); Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1983); E. J. Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780* (Cambridge, 2003); Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1707–1837* (New Haven, Conn., 2005); David A. Bell, *The Cult of the Nation in France: Inventing Nationalism, 1680–1800* (Cambridge, Mass., 2003); George L. Mosse, *Confronting the Nation: Jewish and Western Nationalism* (Waltham, Mass., 1993).

²⁵ S. Radhakrishnan, *Indian Philosophy*, 2 vols. (London, 1923–1927); Surendranath Dasgupta, *A History of Indian Philosophy*, 5 vols. (Cambridge, 1922–1955); J. N. Mohanty, *Classical Indian Philosophy* (Lanham, Md., 2000). See also Klaus K. Klostermaier, *Hinduism: A Short History* (Oxford, 2000), 160.

the domain of renunciative, ascetic, and meditative practices. Each of these domains had its own textual and discursive tradition, the *dharmasastra*, the *arthasastra*, the *kamasutra*, and the *mokhasastra*, belonging to various religious schools and sects pertaining to ascetic and meditative practices, respectively.²⁶ However, a hierarchy was assumed in terms of the relative importance of each of the four goals, with the pursuit of *moksha* ranked the highest and of *kama* the lowest.

Within this framework, freedom and politics as the pursuit of power constituted two exclusive and mutually incompatible domains. Whereas the latter involved governance and warfare, the former required complete renunciation of the other three goals, including power. Given this perspective, it is not surprising that Gandhi's involvement in the twentieth-century anticolonial resistance movement was marked by a commitment to renunciative freedom as the highest goal, and at the same time by a critique of the Western discourse of freedom as being partly an exercise of power, most evident in colonialism. It was as part of this philosophical tradition that the *samnyasin*, or renouncer, as the seeker of *moksha*, or renunciative freedom, came to be one of the principal figures in Indian life.²⁷

IT WAS THE ADVENT OF British colonial rule in India and the challenge posed by the introduction of the Western discourse of freedom that brought renunciative freedom into the center of Indian thought. As a parallel indigenous discourse of freedom, *moksha* had a certain sense of kinship with, but more significantly a strong sense of rivalry with, the Western notion of political identitarian freedom.²⁸ It was inevitable that the two traditions would clash. This historic encounter presented Indian thinkers with a fundamental dilemma: Were they to abandon the received understanding of renunciative freedom and accept the Western discourse of political freedom, or were they to attempt to build a bridge between the two? Was such a bridge even possible, or were the two discursive traditions incompatible? This conflict and the need to resolve the tension created by the contrary pulls of the two discourses emerged as the primary dilemma for Indian political thinkers in the colonial period.

There were three options available to Indians at this juncture of colonialism. They could ignore the colonial political system and continue with the pursuit of renunciative freedom. They could adopt the Western notion of political freedom and abandon a significant part of their religious and spiritual traditions, while endeavoring

²⁶ J. Duncan M. Derrett, *Dharmasastra and Juridical Literature* (Wiesbaden, 1973); Narendra Nath Law, *Studies in Ancient Hindu Polity (Based on the Arthasāstra of Kautilya)* (London, 1914); Roger Boesche, *The First Great Political Realist: Kautilya and His Arthasastra* (Lanham, Md., 2002); Vatsyayana, *The Kama Sutra of Vatsyayana: The Classic Hindu Treatise on Love and Social Conduct*, trans. Richard F. Burton (New York, 1991).

²⁷ My focus here is not on the articulation and evolution of the idea of renunciative freedom in premodern India within a variety of schools and sects, but rather its rearticulation in the specifically colonial context of modern India. However, for some important works on renunciation and freedom in premodern India, see Patrick Olivelle, *Samnyasa Upanisads: Hindu Scriptures on Asceticism and Renunciation* (New York, 1992); Louis Dumont, "World Renunciation in Indian Religions," *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, no. 4 (1960): 33–62; J. C. Heesterman, *The Inner Conflict of Tradition: Essays in Indian Ritual, Kingship, and Society* (Chicago, 1985).

²⁸ Political thinkers of the West such as Thomas Hobbes, Francis Bacon, David Hume, and John Locke were studied in British educational institutions in India. See B. D. Basu, *History of Education under the Rule of the East India Company* (Calcutta, 1922); and Aparna Basu, *The Growth of Education and Political Development in India, 1898–1920* (Delhi, 1974).

to lay the foundations of a political discourse of resistance against the British colonial government in India. Or they could try to find some middle ground between the two traditions of freedom without abandoning either entirely.

It was this third option that nineteenth-century Indian thinkers such as Rammohan Roy, Swami Vivekananda, Bankim Chandra Chatterji, and Rabindranath Tagore chose, by creating a discourse of ethical freedom as a bridge between the imperative of renunciative freedom and political freedom. The established discourse of freedom underwent two fundamental transformations in modern India. In the first half of the nineteenth century, as a result of the encounter with the Western discourse of freedom brought by British colonialism, the pursuit of renunciative freedom, which in the past had been an individual pursuit and involved a complete renunciation of the world and an ascetic retreat from it, was transformed into an ethical engagement with the world in the form of social service or service to humanity as a whole. In 1920, with Gandhi's declaration of the non-cooperation movement against British rule, this pursuit of renunciative freedom through ethical engagement with the world was transformed yet again, this time into a political engagement with the world involving active confrontation and conflict with the established political system. The Gandhian revolution in the discourse of renunciative freedom consisted in a novel combination of an ethics of service to society and an ethics of resistance to the state.

UNLIKE RENUNCIATIVE FREEDOM, which required a complete withdrawal from the world, ethical freedom allowed one to engage with the world without losing the telos of freedom. The way to do this was to let go of one's individual identity and interests by dedicating oneself to the service of society and the greater good. This ethical turn allowed Indian thinkers in the nineteenth century to avoid direct political confrontation with the colonial government, whose role they continued to articulate in terms of the discourse of imperial justice.²⁹

It was Rammohan Roy who brought the discourse of renunciative freedom to center stage in Indian thought by deliberately abandoning *bhakti* as the dominant form of Hinduism and founding a new religion in 1830 called Brahmo Samaj, based on the ancient Upanishadic ideas of *Brahman* and *moksha*.³⁰ Marking a break from the past, however, Roy argued that the pursuit of *moksha* did not require one to renounce the world. Rather, it could now be achieved by devoting oneself to social

²⁹ As the British colonial government was still in the process of consolidation, and given the level of political consciousness among the Indian people, a mass resistance movement at this time would have been an unlikely project; this was a pragmatic compromise.

³⁰ Rammohun Roy, "Translation of an Abridgement of the Vedant," in Roy, *The Essential Writings of Raja Rammohan Ray*, ed. Bruce Carlisle Robertson (Delhi, 1999), 4–14. For Roy's life and work, see V. C. Joshi, ed., *Rammohun Roy and the Process of Modernization in India* (Delhi, 1975); S. Cromwell Crawford, *Ram Mohan Roy: Social, Political, and Religious Reform in 19th Century India* (New York, 1987); Bruce Carlisle Robertson, *Raja Rammohan Ray: The Father of Modern India* (Delhi, 1995); Ramananda Chatterji, *Rammohun Roy and Modern India* (Calcutta, 1947). For accounts of the significance of the Brahmo Samaj for Hindu social reform, see David Kopf, *The Brahmo Samaj and the Shaping of the Modern Indian Mind* (Princeton, N.J., 1979); and Charles H. Heimsath, *Indian Nationalism and Hindu Social Reform* (Princeton, N.J., 1964).

service.³¹ It is important to note that this ethical compromise stopped far short of involvement with the affairs of state.

The split between juridico-political liberty and the discourse of renunciative freedom is also evident in the late-nineteenth-century writings of Bankim Chandra Chatterji, one of the most important literary and intellectual figures in modern Bengal and India. Chatterji argued in numerous essays that the juridical discourse of liberty, which presupposed the individual as the subject of law, with rights given or not given by institutions of political society, was a Western import.³² The real telos of Indian life as handed down by the ancient civilization of India was not political liberty, defined as the instrumental use of freedom for the pursuit of material ends, but freedom from desire, or *mukti/moksha*, which was an end in itself.³³ Significantly, he viewed *moksha*, the pursuit of renunciative freedom, as indistinguishable from what he called *dharma*, defined as ethical conduct in the service of humanity. In Chatterji's view, politics was not the domain in which freedom could be exercised or realized; at most it could help to create the conditions under which one had the choice to pursue real freedom, which was *moksha*. Thus it is not surprising that he never fully opposed British rule in India.³⁴ Within his discourse, there was no need for opposition or resistance to foreign rule because politics itself was foreign to the attainment of *moksha*. The goal of national independence under which people could exercise their freedom as legislators by making laws for themselves fell outside his concerns.

It was Swami Vivekananda, however, who had the most lucid insight into the nature of the challenge facing the Indic tradition of renunciative freedom with the establishment of the British Empire and contact with Western intellectual and political traditions. Vivekananda precisely articulated the distinction between the West and India as not just a divergence between Indian spirituality and Western materialism—a generalization that was common in the writings of that period—but a fundamental difference between their respective notions of freedom. In a lecture titled “Hindu and Greek,” he stated:

The Greek sought political liberty. The Hindu has always sought spiritual liberty. Both are one-sided. The Indian cares not enough for national protection or patriotism, he will defend only his religion; while with the Greek and in Europe (where the Greek civilization finds its continuation) the country comes first. To care only for spiritual liberty and not for social liberty is a defect, but the opposite is a still greater defect. Liberty of both soul and body is to be striven for.³⁵

Vivekananda's writings evince the urgent need to somehow build a bridge between the two notions of freedom, to establish some middle ground between them. Like

³¹ Roy, *The Essential Writings*, xxix–xxxi. See also his “Translation of the Moonduk-Opunishad,” *ibid.*, 51–62.

³² Bankim Chandra Chatterji, “Dharmatattva,” in Chatterji, *Bankim rachanavali*, ed. Jogesh Chandra Bagal (Calcutta, 1969), 609. See also Sudipta Kaviraj, *The Unhappy Consciousness: Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay and the Formation of Nationalist Discourse in India* (Delhi, 1995).

³³ Chatterji, *Bankim rachanavali*, 586.

³⁴ In contrast to Partha Chatterjee, who has located the origins of nationalist discourse in Bankim Chandra Chatterji's thoughts on civilizational difference, I contend that this idea of difference did not translate into a political discourse of freedom. See Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World*, 54–81. It is important to note that the anticolonial movement in India had its origins in a discourse of identity with the British Empire: it was based on the notion that Indians had as much claim to rights as any other subjects of the empire.

³⁵ Vivekananda, *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, 8 vols. (Calcutta, 1955), 6: 51.

Bankim Chandra Chatterji and Roy, he found this path in a discourse of ethical freedom.

Redefining true renunciation as unselfish work and work without the desire for results, Vivekananda stated:

the ordinary *Samnyasin* gives up the world, goes out and thinks of God. The real *Samnyasin* lives in the world, but is not of it. Those who deny themselves, live in the forest and chew the cud of unsatisfied desires are not true renouncers. Live in the midst of the battle of life . . . Stand in the whirl and madness of action and reach the Center.³⁶

The goal for the real *samnyasin*, then, was ethical service to humanity:

The true *samnyasins* forgo even their own liberation and live simply for doing good to the world . . . The *Samnyasin* is born into the world to lay down his life for others, to stop the bitter cries of men, to wipe the tears of the widow, to bring peace to the soul of the bereaved mother, to equip the ignorant masses for the struggle for existence . . . and to arouse the sleeping lion of Brahman in all by throwing in the light of knowledge.³⁷

Vivekananda exhorted his disciples to immerse themselves as *samnyasins* in the work of educating the masses, particularly women, and in charitable activities to reduce poverty and illiteracy.³⁸ Indeed, he was inspired by the goal of ethical freedom to establish the Ramakrishna Mission, a network of charitable institutions run by *samnyasins* whose primary aim was the service of humanity.³⁹ As with Roy, Vivekananda's attempt to find some middle ground between the two notions of freedom stopped far short of anything that could be recognized as political.

The most vivid illustration of the nature of this ethical pursuit of *moksha* and the historical-political circumstances under which it was invented can be found in Rabindranath Tagore's novel *Gora* (White Boy).⁴⁰ Tagore, who won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1913, was second only to Gandhi in his intellectual importance and his influence on modern Indian culture.⁴¹ The title character in *Gora* is an extremely conservative Brahmin Hindu who is leading a Hindu nationalist movement against British colonial rule, a movement that is also hostile to Muslims. At the height of his political career, he learns that the Brahmin Hindu couple who raised him were not his real parents; he is, in fact, Irish by birth: he was left in the care of his Hindu family by a couple from Ireland after the Rebellion of 1857 against British rule.⁴² *Gora* is devastated by this revelation, for now it is impossible for him to continue to lead an independence movement based on Hindu religious and national identity.

³⁶ Ibid., 50.

³⁷ Ibid., 466–467.

³⁸ Ibid., 444.

³⁹ See Gwilym Beckerlegge, *The Ramakrishna Mission: The Making of a Modern Hindu Movement* (Delhi, 2000).

⁴⁰ Rabindranath Tagore, *Gora*, trans. Sujit Mukherjee (New Delhi, 2003).

⁴¹ For the life of Tagore, see Edward John Thompson, *Rabindranath Tagore: Poet and Dramatist* (London, 1948); Krishna Kripalani, *Rabindranath Tagore: A Biography* (New York, 1962); Krishna Dutta and Andrew Robinson, *Rabindranath Tagore: The Myriad-Minded Man* (New York, 1996); Uma Dasgupta, *Rabindranath Tagore: A Biography* (Delhi, 2004).

⁴² For some histories of 1857, see Sashi Bhusan Chaudhuri, *Civil Rebellion in the Indian Mutinies, 1857–1859* (Calcutta, 1957); Rudrangshu Mukherjee, *Awadh in Revolt, 1857–1858: A Study of Popular Resistance* (Delhi, 1984); Eric Stokes, *The Peasant Armed: The Indian Revolt of 1857*, ed. C. A. Bayly (Oxford, 1986); Gautam Bhadra, "Four Rebels of Eighteen-Fifty-Seven," in Ranajit Guha, ed., *Subaltern Studies IV* (Delhi, 1985), 229–275; William Dalrymple, *The Last Mughal: The Fall of a Dynasty, Delhi, 1857* (New York, 2008).

He suddenly finds himself to be neither a Brahmin nor a Hindu, nor indeed even an Indian. At the same time, he has lived the life of a Hindu for far too long to find his way back to his Irish and Christian identity. It is as if an abyss has opened up right under his feet.

But it is through this complete loss of identity that Gora goes on to discover his true purpose: selfless service to India and to all of humanity. In Tagore's eyes, this is the moment of his real freedom. With this discovery, however, the novel ends, implying that with the attainment of Gora's true freedom, the political project of national independence from British rule has been abandoned. In effect, Tagore, like his predecessors, failed to reconcile the pursuit of *moksha* as ethical engagement with the world with a discourse of anticolonial resistance.⁴³

At an obvious level, *Gora* reflects Tagore's concern about a new form of nationalism based on Hindu national identity that was emerging in India in the early twentieth century. However, given that this form of Hindu nationalism was essentially derivative of the modern discourse of political freedom, with its three pillars of national identity, nationalism, and the nation-state, the novel is at a deeper level a critique of the discourse of political identitarian freedom as such. If the question of identity is central to the story, that is because Tagore viewed the modern discourse of political freedom as based on a fundamental division between the self and the other, a division that was at the root of much of the conflict that accompanied the rise of nationalism in the modern world. In the discourse of ethical freedom, defined as service to society or humanity as a whole, any kind of identity, individual or collective, not only signified the absence of freedom but was, in fact, a positive form of bondage.⁴⁴ From the perspective of the Indic understanding of freedom, the modern notion of political freedom was a contradiction in terms.

JUST AS THE DISCOURSE of freedom in India seemed unable to get past the ethics of social service in the pre-Gandhian period, political discourse was equally moribund—trapped in a discourse of imperial justice, it had been unable to find its way out toward national independence.⁴⁵ Imperial justice was the larger discursive formation within which the British policy of divide and rule operated in the post-1857 period. The Rebellion of 1857 had dramatically exposed the fragility of the East India Company's rule over India.⁴⁶ It had also driven home the fact that significant parts

⁴³ Tagore was very conscious of the difficulties inherent in trying to reconcile the two discourses of freedom: "I sometimes detect in myself a battle ground where two opposing forces are constantly in action, one beckoning to peace and the cessation of strife, the other egging me on to battle." Sisirkumar Ghose, *Rethinking Tagore: Three Lectures* (Mysore, 1982), 4.

⁴⁴ For incisive analyses of nationalism and humanitarianism in Tagore, see Ashis Nandy, *The Illegitimacy of Nationalism: Rabindranath Tagore and the Politics of Self* (Delhi, 1994); Martha C. Nussbaum, "Patriotism and Cosmopolitanism," in Martha C. Nussbaum with Respondents, *For Love of Country: Debating the Limits of Patriotism*, ed. Joshua Cohen (Boston, 1996), 3–17. For a related discussion, see also Prathama Banerjee, "The Work of Imagination: Temporality and Nationhood in Colonial Bengal," in Mayaram, Pandian, and Skaria, *Muslims, Dalits, and the Fabrications of History*, 280–322.

⁴⁵ For an elaborate discussion of the discourse of imperial justice and the politics of the Indian National Congress, see Mithi Mukherjee, *India in the Shadows of Empire: A Legal and Political History, 1774–1950* (New Delhi, 2010).

⁴⁶ For a general discussion of the implications of 1857 for British policy in India, see Bernard S. Cohn, "Representing Authority in Victorian India," in Cohn, *An Anthropologist among the Historians and Other Essays* (Delhi, 1990), 632–682; Francis G. Hutchins, *The Illusion of Permanence: British Imperialism in*

of the Indian population were capable of uniting when it came to opposing the colonial government, and that force alone would not suffice to maintain the British Empire in India.

It is significant, therefore, that the Queen's Proclamation of 1858, which put the British monarchy at the helm of the British Empire in India under the discourse of imperial justice, went hand in hand with a discourse that denied India the status of a nation and portrayed it as a divided society at war with itself.⁴⁷ Torn by internal conflict, India was in desperate need, it was claimed, of a neutral and therefore preferably foreign power to govern it and secure the peace. The colonial hope was that the fragmentation of Indian society into innumerable minorities would keep it trapped in the discourse of imperial justice with no access to the discourse of political freedom, making the British presence seem permanently indispensable. It was this brilliant invention of the discourse of imperial justice that turned the exteriority, or foreign origin, of the colonial state into a strength rather than a weakness; the exteriority of the state to the "native" society was presented as a requirement not just for the peace and security of the country, but for its very existence.

Even Gandhi himself, until as late as 1918, framed his political discourse in terms of the goal of imperial justice. After his return to India from South Africa in 1914, even while leading some of the most extensive peasants' and workers' movements in Champaran, Kheda, and Ahmedabad, he continued to view these movements primarily in terms of the imperial juridical paradigm, as essentially pleas for justice.⁴⁸ With the passage of time, however, the long-held and surprisingly widespread hope of imperial justice was beginning to appear to the people of India more like a political trap intended to keep India a British colony indefinitely.⁴⁹ Yet, while the inadequacy of the discourse of justice was becoming clear, the Indic discourse of freedom, having abandoned the renunciative path, had come only so far as an ethical engagement with the world. What was urgently required for an adequate response to the challenge of colonialism was a discourse of resistance.

It was under these circumstances that the underlying violence of British colonial rule was brutally brought home to Gandhi with the massacre at Jallianwala Bagh in the Punjab in 1919.⁵⁰ Large numbers of Indians, including old people, women, and children, were slaughtered by the British army at a nonviolent prayer meeting that was taking place within a walled compound, held in response to Gandhi's call for a

India (Princeton, N.J., 1967), 79–100; Thomas R. Metcalf, *Aftermath of Revolt: India, 1857–1870* (Princeton, N.J., 1964), 92–327; Metcalf, *Ideologies of the Raj* (Cambridge, 1994), 28–159.

⁴⁷ Cohn, "Representing Authority in Victorian India," 653.

⁴⁸ *Gandhi's Autobiography*, 405.

⁴⁹ The exploitive nature of British rule was particularly emphasized in the early twentieth century by a radical nationalist faction within the Indian National Congress called the "Extremists" in Indian historiography. See Amalesh Tripathi, *The Extremist Challenge: India between 1890 and 1910* (Bombay, 1967). See also John R. McLane, *Indian Nationalism and the Early Congress* (Princeton, N.J., 1977); Anil Seal, *The Emergence of Indian Nationalism: Competition and Collaboration in the Later Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, 1971).

⁵⁰ Some good accounts of the Jallianwala Bagh massacre are available in Rupert Furneaux, *Massacre at Amritsar* (London, 1963); V. N. Datta, *Jallianwala Bagh* (Punjab, 1969); Helen Fein, *Imperial Crime and Punishment: The Massacre at Jallianwala Bagh and British Judgment, 1919–1920* (Honolulu, 1977); Alfred Draper, *Amritsar: The Massacre That Ended the Raj* (London, 1981).

nationwide protest against the Rowlatt Act.⁵¹ The deliberate nature of the massacre and the brutality with which it was carried out, followed by the British government's refusal to punish the general who had ordered it, Reginald Dyer, finally shut the window of hope that the discourse of imperial justice had offered to Gandhi and others in the Indian National Congress for more than three decades.⁵² It was at this moment that Gandhi departed radically from his earlier juridical modes of agitation, such as petitioning, signature campaigns, and presenting memoranda to the British government, and began a new era of open resistance and confrontation. The possibility of any reconciliation between the Indian people and the British government now appeared to him illusory. As he stated during his 1922 trial, the massacre at Jallianwalla Bagh had proved that the colonial government, "established by law in British India," was being used "for the exploitation of the Indian masses and for prolonging her servitude. I hold it to be a virtue to be disaffected towards a government which in its totality has done more harm to India than any previous system."⁵³

The beginning of a new discourse of resistance was dotted by major milestones, including the non-cooperation movement in 1920, the civil disobedience movement in 1930, and the "Quit India" movement in 1942.⁵⁴ Given that Gandhi himself had been a lawyer, this departure from the discourse of imperial justice became dramatically evident in his call to ban practicing lawyers from leading or even participating in the anticolonial movement. Insofar as any association with the British judicial system reflected a residual faith in the discourse of imperial justice, it had to be thoroughly rejected.

THUS THE TIME HAD COME for the creation of a new order of discourse. It is not surprising that after Gandhi's arrival in India, even as he began to grapple with the questions of the day, he also began to move, largely unawares, toward the figure of the *samnyasin*. For while renunciation had been the condition for truth in society through much of Indian history, the enunciative persona of the renouncer had been seen as the sole agent of truth. In contrast to scholars of the renunciative tradition, however, Gandhi came to the discourse of *moksha* in search of an answer to a political question. It was as a political activist that he became a renouncer.

Gandhi made this significant move at a historical juncture when the limits of the discourse of imperial justice stood exposed. Stepping into the enunciative position of the *samnyasin* enabled him to be an enunciator of truth with the power to challenge the discourse of the British Empire. Vivekananda, who had himself become a *samnyasin*, had asserted that to speak of politics in India, one had to speak the language of religion.⁵⁵ And in the view of the masses of India, only the renouncer could speak the true language of religion: when one "preached as a householder,"

⁵¹ By this act the British government in India had acquired the right to arrest individuals without a warrant and hold them in prison without trial, to hold special trials without a jury, and to disarm the Indian population. For the movement against the Rowlatt Act, see Kumar, *Essays on Gandhian Politics*.

⁵² Nigel Collett, *The Butcher of Amritsar: General Reginald Dyer* (London, 2005).

⁵³ From Gandhi's written statement in the trial of 1921. See M. K. Gandhi, *The Law and the Lawyers*, comp. and ed. S. B. Kher (Ahmedabad, 1962), 114–119.

⁵⁴ Although the formal call for "purna swaraj" did not come until January 26, 1930, a decisive break with the earlier discourse of imperial justice is already evident in the non-cooperation movement.

⁵⁵ Vivekananda, "My Life and Mission," in *The Complete Works*, 8: 77.

Vivekananda pointed out, “the Hindu people will turn back and go out. If you have given up the world, however, they say, ‘He is good, he has given up the world.’”⁵⁶ Having detached himself from the affairs of the world and identified himself with the cosmos, the renouncer stood outside society, and it was precisely that position of disinterestedness and impartiality toward the affairs of the world that made him the enunciator of truth. Vivekananda had even suggested that the authority that the *samnyasins* commanded as enunciators of truth in Indian society be put to the service of politics: “This tremendous power in the hands of the roving *samnyasins* of India has got to be transformed, and it will raise the masses up.”⁵⁷ In a sense, then, we can say that the emergence of Gandhi, and the discursive position that he came to occupy, was anticipated in the discursive context of late-nineteenth- and twentieth-century India, where the discourse of renunciation had come to be tied to the discourse of ethical service to society.⁵⁸ It was because Gandhi spoke as a *samnyasin* that his discourse was accepted and recognized as the discourse of truth.

Even while occupying the enunciative position of a *samnyasin*, Gandhi significantly transformed its meaning. Whereas in its traditional religious sense *samnyasa* meant the renunciation of all worldly activities, Gandhi redefined the concept:

Samnyasa does not mean the renunciation of all activities; it means only the renunciation of activities prompted by desire and of the fruits of action performed as duty. This is real freedom from activity. That is why one must learn to see inactivity in activity and activity in inactivity.⁵⁹

In his declaration of non-cooperation with British rule, however, he also marked a break from the nineteenth-century ethical discourse of *moksha*, the pursuit of freedom as social service. For it was in the Gandhian discourse that the discourse of transcendental freedom, previously grounded on the explicit rejection and exteriorization of politics, came to intersect with the historical concern for independence from British rule and the idea of resistance.

In this age, only political *samnyasis* can fulfill and adorn the ideal of *samnyasa*, others will more than likely disgrace the *samnyasin*’s saffron robe . . . One who aspires to a truly religious life cannot fail to undertake public service as his mission, and we are today so much caught up in the political machine that service of the people is impossible without taking part in politics.⁶⁰

For Gandhi, however, political engagement had to be subordinated to the idea of renunciative freedom. It was at the core of his revolutionary innovations in the field of political strategy. His insistence on nonviolence derived from his belief that politics should always be subordinated to the idea and practice of renunciation. “For me the effort for attaining *swaraj*/national political independence is a part of the

⁵⁶ Ibid, 89.

⁵⁷ Ibid, 90.

⁵⁸ In their studies of the Gandhian movement, historians such as Shahid Amin have analyzed the different and often conflicting perceptions among the peasantry of Gandhi as a “mahatma” or renouncer. What is significant from my perspective is not so much how Gandhi was perceived by people participating in the movement as how his emergence can be said to have been foreseen to a large extent in the historical and cultural context of twentieth-century India. See Amin, “Gandhi as Mahatma.”

⁵⁹ Gandhi in a letter to Narayan M. Khare, March 12, 1932, in Mahatma Gandhi, *The Moral and Political Writings of Mahatma Gandhi*, ed. Raghavan Iyer, 3 vols. (Oxford, 1986), 2: 627.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 1: 138.

effort for *moksha* . . . I would not be tempted to give up my striving after *moksha* even for the sake of *swaraj*.”⁶¹ The end was not the overcoming of the other through appropriation by the self, but the transcendence of desire itself. Intrinsically tied to the goal of *moksha*, therefore, was the ideal of nonattachment, *anasakti*. Attachment led to worldly involvement and was a major obstacle to the attainment of renunciative freedom. The aspirant toward *moksha* thus had to cultivate a total absence of desire. In Gandhian discourse, the idea of freedom was located outside G. W. F. Hegel’s dialectic of master and slave, for Indians, while refusing to be slaves, would also renounce the desire to be masters. The self was to become a cipher in which truth could reside. “When the sense of ‘I’ has vanished, we cease to feel that we are subject to anyone’s authority. He who feels himself to be a cipher experiences peace in all conditions of life.”⁶² Freedom, then, was indistinguishable from renunciation—renunciation of desire and of identity.

For the political *samnyasi* or *satyagrahi*, certain renunciative practices were imperative.⁶³ “Self-effacement is *moksha*,” wrote Gandhi in his autobiography, “and whilst it cannot, by itself, be an observance, there may be other observances necessary for its attainment.” The practices of *brahmacharya* (celibacy), fasting, *aparigraha* (non-possession), and especially *ahimsa* (nonviolence) were essential to the life of a *satyagrahi*. “*Satyagraha*,” Gandhi declared at the commencement of the movement around the Rowlatt Act, “is a process of self-purification, and ours is a sacred fight, and it seems to me to be in the fitness of things that it should be commenced with an act of self-purification. Let all the people of India, therefore, suspend their business on that day and observe the day as one of fasting and prayer.”⁶⁴ It was from this perspective that the discourse and practice of freedom in India came to be tied to the concepts of duty, responsibility, and conscience, rather than to individual rights.

The radical nature of the shift from the peaceful, ethical pursuit of freedom to a confrontational albeit nonviolent politics of resistance is evident in Tagore’s public critique of Gandhi’s politics.⁶⁵ Gandhi had always insisted that the telos of national independence be subordinated to the attainment of *moksha*, which for him meant the effacement of the consciousness of the self or the ego. In Tagore’s eyes, Gandhi’s declaration of non-cooperation and the initiation of active resistance were symptomatic of his abandonment of the primacy of the discourse and goal of renunciative freedom over national independence.⁶⁶

⁶¹ Gandhi, “Striving after Moksha,” *ibid.*, 1: 15.

⁶² Gandhi to Vasumati Pandit, August 21, 1930, *ibid.*, 2: 625.

⁶³ The term *satyagrahi* is a combination of two words—*satya*, truth, and *agrahi*, one who insists (on it), i.e., one who insists on truth. Given the historical context of the anticolonial resistance movement, *satyagrahi* could best be translated as “one who struggles in the way of truth.”

⁶⁴ *Gandhi’s Autobiography*, 414–415. See also *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, 100 vols. (Delhi, 1958–1994), 15: 143.

⁶⁵ Tagore, “The Cult of the Charkha,” in *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, 28: 482–484; Tagore, “Tagore’s Criticism of Non-Cooperation,” *ibid.*, Appendix 4, 23: 485–487.

⁶⁶ In Ashis Nandy’s view, the differences between Tagore and Gandhi were only a matter of emphasis. What united them was a critique of nationalism and a refusal to recognize the nation-state as the organizing principle of Indian civilization. See Nandy, *The Illegitimacy of Nationalism*, 1–4. For other discussions of the differences between Gandhi and Tagore, see Dennis Dalton, *Mahatma Gandhi: Non-violent Power in Action* (New York, 1993), 67–78; T. S. Rukmani, “Tagore and Gandhi,” in Harold Coward, ed., *Indian Critiques of Gandhi* (Albany, N.Y., 2003), 107–128; Sabyasachi Bhattacharya, “Introduction,” in Bhattacharya, comp. and ed., *The Mahatma and the Poet: Letters and Debates between Gandhi and Tagore, 1915–1941* (New Delhi, 1997), 1–37.

As a thinker who shared Gandhi's commitment to the ideals of renunciative and ethical freedom, Tagore found the call for non-cooperation to be divisive and provocative. For him, the rejection of everything foreign was exclusivist, and therefore unacceptable. *Moksha*, as reconstructed in its ethical form, had come to mean identification with all of humanity rather than a retreat into national or communal identity, and Tagore believed that this form of resistance would inevitably lead to disharmony, conflict, and hostility between nations and peoples.⁶⁷

The idea of noncooperation is political asceticism . . . It has at its back a fierce joy of annihilation which at its best is asceticism, and at its worst is that orgy of frightfulness in which the human nature, losing faith in the basic reality of normal life, finds a disinterested delight in unmeaning devastation, as has been shown in the late War and on other occasions . . . *No* in its passive moral form is asceticism and in its active moral form is violence. The desert is as much a form of *himsa* (negligence) as is the raging sea in storm; they both are against life.⁶⁸

The philosophical thought that underlay Tagore's criticism of Gandhi's non-cooperation derived from a commitment to the Upanishadic idea of *advaita*, or non-dualism, which did not allow any division of the world into self and other. This idea, however, preempted any attempt to construct a political discourse of opposition, confrontation, or resistance, which is necessarily articulated in terms of self and other. "The infinite personality of man (as the Upanishads say) can only come from the magnificent harmony of all human races," Tagore wrote.

My prayer is that India may represent the cooperation of all the peoples of the world. For India, unity is truth, and division evil. Unity is that which embraces and understands everything; consequently it cannot be attained through negation. The present attempt to separate our spirit from that of the Occident is an attempt at national suicide . . . No nation can find its own salvation by breaking away from others. We must all be saved or we must all perish together.⁶⁹

Gandhi's response was to assert the importance of rejection in arriving at truth. "Rejection is as much an ideal as the acceptance of a thing. It is as necessary to reject untruth as it is to accept truth . . . we had lost the power of saying 'no.' It had become disloyal, almost sacrilegious to say 'no' to the government."⁷⁰ Referring again to the Upanishads (*Brahmavidya*), he reminded Tagore that the pursuit of freedom necessarily required a series of rejections, because the ideal of renunciative freedom could not be defined positively and pursued directly. Gandhi pointed out that what he called Tagore's "horror of everything negative," including resistance, was not truly representative of the Upanishadic approach to renunciative freedom. The philosophers of the Upanishads had, after all, attempted to define the *Brahman*—the absolute—not in terms of its positive attributes, which could have been limiting and would have turned it into a finite entity or identity, but rather by rejecting all positive definitions: "the final word of the *Upanishads* (*Brahmavidya*)," asserted Gandhi, "is 'Not.' *Neti* was the best description the authors of the *Upanishads* were able to find

⁶⁷ Tagore, "Tagore's Criticism of Non-Cooperation."

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 485.

⁶⁹ Tagore in a letter to C. F. Andrews, March 13, 1921, published in *Modern Review*, May 1921, reproduced in Bhattacharya, *The Mahatma and the Poet*, 61.

⁷⁰ Gandhi, "The Poet's Anxiety," in *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, 23: 220.

for *Brahman*.”⁷¹ This did not mean, however, that non-cooperation was an exclusive doctrine based on identity:

Our non-cooperation is neither with the English nor with the West. Our non-cooperation is with the system that the English have established, with the material civilization and its attendant greed and exploitation of the weak . . . Indian nationalism is not exclusive, nor aggressive, nor destructive. It is health-giving, religious and therefore humanitarian.⁷²

Even while Gandhi cited the Upanishadic principles of negation to defend resistance against the British Empire, he clearly was extending the logic of that negation as it had historically been understood. Negation as renunciation and negation as resistance are two very different kinds of acts. Whereas negation as renunciation involves withdrawing oneself from the world, negation as resistance implies an active engagement with the world in order to change it. The Upanishadic ideal in its traditional form had involved *samnyasa*, leading to a complete ascetic withdrawal from the world. For such a renouncer, active political non-cooperation would have been unimaginable.

This unprecedented and revolutionary transformation of the renunciative tradition to include direct confrontation with an unacceptable political establishment was necessitated, in Gandhi's own view, by the historical conditions of modern society itself, in which politics and the state pervaded every aspect of life. When asked how he reconciled his “idealization” of *samnyasa* with his struggle for national independence or *swaraj*, Gandhi replied:

If the *samnyasins* (renouncers) of the old did not seem to bother their heads about the political life of society, it was because society was differently constructed. But politics, properly so-called, rule every detail of our lives today. We come in touch, that is to say, with the State on hundreds of occasions, whether we will or no. The State affects our moral being. A *samnyasin*, therefore, being well-wisher and servant par excellence of society, must concern himself with the relations of the people with the State, that is to say, he must show the way to attain *swaraj*. Thus conceived, *swaraj* is not a false goal for anyone . . . A *samnyasin*, having attained *swaraj* in his own person, is the fittest to show us the way. A *samnyasin* is in the world, but he is not of the world.⁷³

In Gandhi's view, then, in contrast to the past, when society had been autonomous in relation to the state, politics in the present was so all-pervasive and overpowering that nothing was allowed to remain exterior to it. The omnipotence of the state was accompanied, paradoxically, by a doctrine of political freedom that was grounded on the idea of the state and the discourse of rights and identity. It was imperative under these conditions to launch a struggle to retrieve the earlier discourse of renunciative freedom that had been colonized by political discourse, in parallel with the struggle to regain the autonomy of society from politics. The most appropriate leader for such a movement was clearly the *samnyasin*, who embodied that marginalized discourse of renunciative freedom. Indeed, insofar as the *samnyasin* was “in the world, but not of the world,” his presence in the movement, in Gandhi's view,

⁷¹ Ibid. For other responses by Gandhi to Tagore's criticisms, see “The Poet and the Charkha,” *ibid.*, 33: 196–201; “The Great Sentinel,” *ibid.*, 21: 287–291.

⁷² Gandhi, “The Great Sentinel,” 291.

⁷³ Gandhi, “The Correspondent's Dilemma,” in *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, 31: 376–377.

was a constant reminder that real freedom could not be achieved within politics. The renouncer, then, had a dual function: ethical service to society and ethical resistance to the state. He was to involve himself with politics on behalf of society against the state.

By emphasizing the discourse of renunciative freedom and the figure of the *samnyasin* as the leader of the movement, Gandhi, even as he launched a movement of opposition to the British, was also preempting the emergence in India of a modern Western discourse of freedom based on the state and identity. At stake was not just independence from British rule but the imperative to foreclose the possibility of the emergence and dominance of a discourse of freedom that would be grounded in the nation-state as the all-powerful arbiter of the destiny of people and society, and its corollary the discourse of identity.

IN A CENTURY TORN APART by wars, violence, and genocide, the Gandhian movement against British colonial domination in India stands out as a unique experiment in political resistance: it was the first and also the largest mass resistance movement in the world based entirely on the idea and practice of nonviolence. The critical importance of nonviolence in the Gandhian movement came from its grounding in the Gandhian discourse of renunciative freedom in its difference from Western discourses of political identitarian freedom. The centrality of the notion of freedom to both Indic and Western cultures cannot be understated: while in Indic intellectual traditions the pursuit of renunciative freedom was historically regarded as the supreme goal, in the West the notion of political freedom had over time come to be recognized as its highest political and intellectual achievement. Indeed, it was as a place where the historical telos of political freedom came to find its fulfillment that the modern West presented itself as the ultimate measure and standard for other cultures and societies and their histories. Insofar as the Gandhian nonviolent revolution was grounded in a competing discourse of freedom, Britain, as the self-proclaimed agent of Western civilization, faced much more in India than just another anticolonial resistance movement against the empire: it faced a challenge to its core notion of political freedom.

It was one of the remarkable features of nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century British liberalism that even as it held freedom to be the highest goal that a man or a society could aspire to, it was also the flag-bearer of British colonialism. British liberals saw no contradiction in fighting for democracy or self-government at home and for colonies abroad.⁷⁴ For Gandhi, this reflected the essential nature of the Western discourse of political identitarian freedom, in which there was no contradiction between freedom of the self and domination over the other. In his view, it was precisely because this notion of political freedom was grounded in the idea of the self and identity in general that when faced with the other, it turned into an exercise in domination or power. Thus, power, the Gandhian movement demonstrated, was the underside of the Western discourse of freedom.

Remarkably, Hegel, the philosopher of “the end of history,” had foreseen—

⁷⁴ See Uday Singh Mehta, *Liberalism and Empire: A Study in Nineteenth-Century Liberal Thought* (Chicago, 1999); Bhikhu Parekh, “Decolonizing Liberalism,” in Aleksandras Shtromos, ed., *The End of “Isms”? Reflections on the Fate of Ideological Politics after Communism’s Collapse* (Oxford, 1998), 85–103.

almost a century before the arrival of Gandhi—that the Indic discourse of renunciative freedom might turn its attention to the real world with the intention of changing it. Indeed, sure of his dialectical method, Hegel had even boldly predicted the nature and implications of this possibility were it to come to pass. When this abstract and negative freedom turns to actuality (the concrete world), he asserted in 1821, “it becomes in the realm of both politics and religion the fanaticism of destruction, demolishing the whole existing social order, eliminating all individuals regarded as suspect by a given order . . . Only in destroying something does this negative will (or freedom) have a feeling of its own existence . . . its actualization can only be the fury of destruction.”⁷⁵ Contrary to Hegel’s predictions of “the fury of destruction,” however, the tradition of renunciative freedom introduced to the world a whole new kind of politics—the politics of nonviolence. If history proved Hegel’s prediction wrong in such a dramatic fashion, it was because he had encountered in the notion of renunciative freedom the exteriority of another tradition of thought whose logic escaped his all-encompassing dialectics.

In 1947, as news of the partition of India and a transfer of populations became public, large-scale riots between Hindus and Muslims began to break out in different parts of the country. While the members of the Indian National Congress were busy in Delhi celebrating independence and taking the reins of power, Gandhi spent his last days visiting one riot-prone area after another. It is said that through the moral power of his fasts for peace, he single-handedly brought much of the disorder to a spontaneous halt. When he was fasting in Calcutta, where the most devastating riots occurred, a Hindu man came to speak to him. He told Gandhi about his young son who had been killed by Muslim mobs, and about the depth of his anger and his longing for revenge. Gandhi is said to have replied: “If you really wish to overcome your pain, find a young boy, just as young as your son, a Muslim boy whose parents have been killed by Hindu mobs. Bring up that boy like you would your own son, but bring him up with the Muslim faith to which he was born. Only then will you find that you can heal your pain, your anger, and your longing for retribution.” The only way to overcome the cycle of revenge, in Gandhi’s view, was to reverse and thereby shatter the logic of identity. In the Gandhian frame of things, it was not the assertion of identity that would bring true freedom, but the loss of it. It is not surprising, then, that Gandhi was assassinated by a Hindu nationalist whose idea of freedom based on national identity, nationalism, and the nation-state found itself in conflict with a Gandhian discourse of freedom that went beyond identity and state.

⁷⁵ G. W. F. Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, ed. Allen W. Wood, trans. H. B. Nisbet (Cambridge, 1991), 38. Note that Hegel compares the Hindu idea of renunciative freedom to the idea of abstract freedom in the French Revolution, which resulted in the Reign of Terror.

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